Sustained Change, Continuous Improvement

Regional School Unit 16

Proficiency-Based Learning

Implementation Case Study

The towns of Regional School Unit 16 (RSU 16) – Mechanic Falls, Minot and Poland, Maine – have a long history of being united while preserving their individual voices. In the early 20th century, 17 neighborhood schools (each then called a "district") covered the area now overseen by RSU 16. Over the century, these 17 schools "consolidated" into the three towns' K-8 schools, with high school students being tuitioned out to nearby districts (with a few exceptions). Throughout this time, the three towns "shared" a central office staff by forming School Union 29. In 1999, Poland Regional High School was built, allowing the school union to serve a vast majority of its students in kindergarten through 12th grade. This high school became celebrated among Maine educators, as it was the first high school to implement various progressive practices, such as standards-based grading, advisor/advisee programs, an integrated humanities program and professional learning communities (though they weren't called that at the time). In 2009, as part of Governor Baldacci's initiative to consolidate Maine's schools into larger, multi-town districts, the three towns solidified their relationship by founding the Regional School Unit.

The economy of RSU 16 was once centered on local mills, resorts and proximity to the nearby cities of Lewiston and Auburn. The one major industry remaining in the district is Poland Spring Natural Water Bottling, which has ties to the Poland Spring Resort. The bucolic image on the Poland Spring bottles is somewhat true to life, as these foothill communities

have more than their fair share of lakes, streams and camps. Enrollment in RSU 16 has hovered around 1,700 for the past decade, only increasing systematically when the district added a PreK program in each of its elementary schools in 2010. High School enrollment has typically floated between 800 and 850 students.

Disclaimer: The author of this case study, Gary Chapin, served as curriculum coordinator for RSU 16 from 2009 to 2011.

Poland Regional High School

In 1997, the citizens of Poland voted to construct a high school that would serve the region of Mechanic Falls, Minot and Poland. In 1998, while the campus was being built, administration and key teacher leadership was in place. They found themselves facing a situation almost unprecedented for educators: they were starting from scratch. Whatever they chose to do, they would not be faced with the objection, "But that's not the way we do it here." One of the major obstacles to designing a genuinely progressive educational system – regard for the status quo – would not be present as the planning committee designed the building, curriculum and culture of Poland Regional High School (PRHS). Or so they thought.

The key ideas that the new school would incorporate into its structure were these: 1) a freshman/sophomore loop – in which teachers stay with the same students for two years – with an integrated humanities program; 2) an advisor/advisee program that was central to school culture; 3) professional collaboration among faculty; and 4) standards-based grading and reporting. Among educators, in 1998 and 1999, these were exciting ideas,

generally considered ideals of best practice. The Maine Learning Results had been adopted in 1997 – after years of discussion – laying the foundation for standards-based work. The federal government's Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) grants included all of these as examples of best practice. Poland Regional High School had been awarded a CSRD grant from the outset. The new high school's reputation among Maine educators was that it was going to be a school where educators could actually act in the best interest of kids. The school did not feel especially controversial.

The small planning staff that was hired the year before the school opened was, by their own admission, naïve about the project they were undertaking. Current Principal Cari Medd came to the school the summer before it opened. "A few of us who had been hired agreed to work on a committee that summer to design the reporting system," Medd said. She remembers being in the superintendent's office. "Very naively we were saying, 'Let's do this. Let's stop averaging. Let's use these words instead of grades.' All right! Our work is done! We have a grading system. We were very excited. Very idealistic."

The administration at the time, led by Principal Jackie Soychak and Dean of Faculty Derek Pierce, did significant work with parents and community to develop a vision for the high school, but it was, according to many, inadequate. Only a small percentage of parents were on board with the vision of the school. When the high school opened, according to Medd, the new administration did not really make the argument for their new system. "We just opened the school…and then it all went crazy when the reaction from the community was pretty negative," she remembers.

The first three years of PRHS were difficult for a number of reasons, not just because of these new practices. The sense they had that the school had been given some sort of "blank slate" was illusory. There may not have been a PRHS before 1999, but every student was coming from a school of some sort, and more importantly, every parent had an experience of school that shaped his or her idea of what school ought to be. In other words, a status quo for PRHS did exist, even if PRHS did not.

Additionally, though the new administration felt confident in designing new structures (such as report cards), the implementation of these structures provided quite a learning curve. After some years of reaching, the administration adopted "competent," "advanced" and "distinguished" as the language for their report card, but what exactly were the criteria for those? Was it descriptive and rubric-based, or was there a quantifiable way to express it? Would PRHS offer course grades, or would the report card only address standards? How would they arrive at course grades? Averaging? Trending? These were live discussions for years. Said one teacher, "It seemed like every year we were revising our Faculty Grading Guide to do the report card differently." Parents and community members asking about the new system sensed this confusion.

The fact that PRHS was staffed mostly by people whom the community perceived to be strangers only intensified community confusion. This perception of staffing was unanticipated and significant. In these teachers' previous schools, parents and communities knew and trusted them. At PRHS, each teacher was just "another teacher that nobody knows on the list of all the teachers that nobody knows." Also, the faculty tended to be younger. There were no veteran teachers, which led to a credibility gap. According to Medd,

"We kept saying trust us, and they [said], 'We don't know you.'…I think that was part of the naiveté of our approach. [We felt] if we build it, they will come; they'll love it."

Many did not love it. In the first year, very difficult board and parent meetings began in November. To one meeting, public members brought actual pitchforks as a symbol of their displeasure. At other meetings, teachers talked at length about their local upbringing – establishing their credentials as Mainers – in order to bridge the perceived cultural gap between the faculty and community. In the second year of the high school, a public referendum asking that the progressive structures be ended and replaced with a more traditional system made it to the ballot. This vote of "no confidence" did not pass. Faculty hoped that maybe the issue would be settled, but during the third year, the conflict got even fiercer, with calls for the firing of Principal Soychak and Dean of Faculty Pierce. At one point the conflict between some of the community and the faculty developed an element described by some faculty as "bizarre" and very personal, and took on the flavor of a witch-hunt.

At the end of the year, Soychak resigned as principal. The school board, in a tangible show of support for the school's vision, immediately hired Derek Pierce to replace her. This caused consternation in the community among people who hoped that a new administrator could be brought in to "clean this up," according to Medd. For faculty, though, this was reassuring – evidence that PRHS would stay the course. In the fourth year, the conflict calmed significantly (though never entirely). A number of questions were answered. The Faculty Grading Guide came into its more-or-less permanent form – though it is revisited

every year – and faculty arrived at a general agreement about what assessment and grading practices ought to look like.

As hard as it was, nearly all of the key features of the PRHS vision – standards-based grading, faculty collaboration, integrated course work, etc. – survived these first years. Some features faced change, but not due to public pressure about the system. Freshmen/sophomore looping was discontinued when data showed there wasn't a benefit from it, but there was no public pressure to do so. Common planning time – wherein faculty collaboration occurred – was reduced in the 2009 contract negotiations because of the consolidation of the RSU and general budget pressures.

And the high school maintained its reputation in the state as being on the cutting edge of education. Faculty at PRHS offered graduate-level courses in standards-based unit design. Teachers from other districts that were considering moving into standards-based systems visited the school. Teachers and administrators of a particular mindset felt drawn to work there. PRHS math teacher Pam Rawson, who also has done professional development for math teachers, recalled being attracted to the school because of "the idea of how student-centered it was, the idea of interdisciplinary curriculum and the freedom to explore some of those cross-curricular connections."

Having survived the fight, and having begun to thrive, the ideas PRHS institutionalized began to influence the district of which it was a part.

School Union 29

The governance of School Union 29 was designed to allow the towns to be united as one district while asserting their separate voices. In fact, this was the driving force behind the school union model, allowing towns to share central office services (primarily a superintendent) while compromising as little as possible on issues of local control. There were five separate school committees, each having its own budget, monthly meetings and functions: each town – Mechanic Falls, Minot and Poland – had a school committee; the regional high school had a school committee (with representation from all towns, though only Poland members could vote, as the school was owned by Poland); and the school union, as a whole, had its own committee.

As Poland Regional High School went through its fitful, three-year long development, the other schools of the union watched in the role of interested spectators, but not of participants or invested colleagues. Each town had eighth graders who would be sent off to the high school, and there was concern at the high school about how to accommodate students coming to them from three different schools with three different curricula.

Around 2001, the effort began to bring some unity to the district. This coincided with the hiring of Curriculum Coordinator Christine Chamberlain, who introduced a structure for bringing together the district K-8 curricula. This structure involved forming district-wide, K-12 subject area committees and an overseeing curriculum council. The task of these groups was to write a comprehensive, district-wide, K-12 curriculum that would allow for all students in the three towns to come to the high school equally prepared, and to allow the district's design of curriculum to flow comprehensively and reasonably from Kindergarten to grade 12.

This process involved writing district standards in each of the eight content areas of the Maine State Learning Results and then mapping these standards (along with performance indicators) to specific courses and grade levels. Thus, the idea went, every second grader in the district would be meeting the same math standards and performance indicators, for example.

These Subject Area Committees (SACs) were the beginning of professional learning communities for the district. The meetings were awkward at first, according to a number of participants. High school teachers would wonder what they were expected to say about the elementary curriculum. They didn't want to intrude into their elementary colleagues' domain, and didn't feel qualified to do so. Eventually the tension eased, and a "critical friends" level of collegiality developed. Over two years, the curriculum was written by the SACs, presented to the faculty, edited according to their response and adopted by the schools.

Meanwhile, in the elementary schools, a move toward a standards-based or standards-referenced system was taking hold on its own. This mirrored a similar move in elementary schools throughout the state. It wasn't driven by the high school's progressive structure, but the structure certainly encouraged it. The SACs were a venue in which issues around standards and rubrics could be discussed. In 2003, Chamberlain left the position of curriculum coordinator. Rather than hiring another curriculum coordinator, the district hired an assistant superintendent, and curriculum work largely became a matter for the separate buildings again – even if they did share standards and a curriculum.

Regional School Unit 16

In 2007, the building principals of School Union 29 realized that the curriculum work of the district was flagging. They lobbied the superintendent to hire a curriculum coordinator, rather than continuing with the assistant superintendent model. The SACs had continued meeting, but the focus of the curriculum work was lacking. Mary Martin, then principal of Elm Street School in Mechanic Falls, said the administration realized that "having a curriculum person, having somebody that is going to take the leadership role at the top administrative level, is important. And not that they're going to be the people that necessarily will do all of the work, but somebody has to be in charge." This represented a strong position on the part of the forthcoming school district. The school committee required that the coordinator's position be added in a "budget neutral" fashion. Thus, a support position at the central office was eliminated, and other funds were shifted to make the hiring possible.

There were other reasons to consider hiring a district curriculum person. Most importantly, the district was moving through consolidation, meaning that, rather than being loosely affiliated neighbors sharing a superintendent, the three towns were becoming truly one district. Though the RSU was comprised of the same towns as the previous school union, significant changes came with the shift in governance. For example, the manner in which the schools received federal grants changed. As members of School Union 29, each of the towns applied for and received No Child Left Behind (NCLB) grants (Title 1, Title II, Title IV, etc.) separately. After the consolidation, the schools of RSU 16 applied for such grants as a single unit, developing a plan for the district and administering

those resources as a district. This strengthened the district-wide/K-12 focus of the curriculum. In the new structure, the curriculum coordinator was the NCLB grant administrator.

Initially, the district hired Cari Medd – who was then a teacher at PRHS – as the new curriculum coordinator. She entered into the position, but six months later was asked to step in as interim Principal for PRHS. A year later, in 2009, they hired Gary Chapin (see Disclaimer) for the position of curriculum coordinator.

2009 was the first year of the RSU's formal existence, and Chapin's first mandate was to help the superintendent bring the district together; second, he was to move the district more toward standards-based practice. Combining these two mandates, he worked with the technology director to create a district-wide report card for K-8 use in the district's *Infinite Campus* student information system. This involved taking the existing elementary and middle school report cards, which were similar but not identical, and then working with the faculty of the combined schools to agree about which standards would be reported on at each grade level, what the scale would be (numbers, letters, 1 through 4?), and whether "+" and "-" , would be allowed. Once those conversations had happened, the new report card was implemented, and focus began to shift to instructional practices, such as unit design, rubric design, etc.

The following year, the State of Maine announced that it was planning to adopt the Common Core State Standards for writing, reading and mathematics as the Maine Learning Results ELA and mathematics standards. The administration saw this as an opportunity to reinforce standards-based practice. All of the work of this "year of learning" focused not

only on the Common Core, but also on standards-based practices, again, around rubric design, assessment design, etc.

Also during this second year, the middle schools of the three towns were consolidated into the one middle school in Poland: Bruce M. Whittier Middle School. This was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it created one middle school faculty, who could serve as constant resources to each other. Thus, rather than having one science teacher at each school who came together three times over the year, for example, the three science teachers would be able to meet daily for unit planning, curriculum work or simply answering questions for each other. Secondly, as the school came together, consideration was given to assembling a faculty who could extend the practices and ideals of the high school – standards-based, learner-centered – into the middle school. Then-Principal Ayesha Farag-Davis was committed to a number of transformative efforts, including implementing restorative justice practices and firming up standards-based, learner-centered practices in the school.

Farag-Davis instituted work and study groups to discuss a series of issues for the middle school. The group devoted to standards-based reporting revised the middle school standards and made recommendations about how the school should handle issues around honor roll and eligibility. The group also engaged the faculty as a whole in conversations about how to institute a system that separated work habits and behavior from the academic standards. At the end of the second year, at a summer institute, Farag-Davis and Chapin facilitated a full-faculty workshop on Bea McGarvey and Chuck Schwahn's book,

Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning, as a way to focus the teacher's attention on personalized instruction issues.

In the year following, district-wide work continued to revise the district standards to reflect the adoption of the Common Core. Grade-level meetings reviewed the standards to consider how they might be instructed and assessed and what resources would be necessary. Simultaneously, an effort was made to pilot a new standards-based module of *Infinite Campus's Gradebook* add-on. The thought was that while the structures of school – report cards, schedules, grade books, etc. – aren't necessarily the point of transformative school efforts, structures that hinder standards-based practice prove to be barriers to implementation and encourage resistance. The hope was that *Infinite Campus's* module would provide a structure that would increase the ease with which standards-based scores could be reported. In the end, *Infinite Campus* was not up to the task, and work stalled after a few meetings with willing pilot teachers – those seen as "tech savvy" by administration – who explicitly declared that the new system would not serve their needs. By spring of 2013, this dilemma had yet to be solved, and teachers in the various buildings were devising their own individual solutions to "the grade-book problem."

What struck many of the participants in this study – especially those who had worked in a number of buildings in the district – was how each community that implemented these transformative practices had to have their own conversation about what it meant to work in this way. For example, it has been well established that there is value in separating the content grade from the work habit grade. Poland Regional High

School had this conversation 13 years ago and came to a conclusion about how to cope with that.

Ten years after, in 2009, the middle school had to have its own conversation and work through the implications with its own teachers. They weren't able to refer back to the conversations of the high school and consider it settled. They had to have their own conversation. Similarly, the high school has had a standards-based system for honor role and eligibility since their doors opened. When the middle school needed to design its own systems for eligibility and honor role, they took the high school's system as only one data point. They had to have their own conversation. *How will this work for us? What does it mean for us?*

After Chapin left the district, the principals and Interim Curriculum Coordinator Jenny Cyr led the district as a whole in developing grade-level expectations and power standards for each content area and each discipline. The following school year, Tina Meserve took the curriculum coordinator position and the work continued. The task of unpacking the Common Core and the Maine Learning Results standards seemed daunting to RSU 16 staff. As Meserve said, "They're standards, not a curriculum." The work the grade-level teams did that year – using nearly every early release and workshop day – involved choosing and organizing the standards that the schools would prioritize at different times during the sequence. "What are the *essential things* we want kids to know?" Meserve asked.

In the buildings, work continued as before: many conversations, constant small improvement attempts and the occasional spectacular success. At Poland Regional High

School, the Faculty Grading Guide was again revised, and the conversations about how best to enact standards-based practice continued. Since the foundation had already settled, any changes were fine tunings. Small book groups, part of the ongoing professional development in the district, read and discussed books like Rick Wormley's *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Grading and Assessing in the Differentiated Classroom* and Ken O'Connor's *A Repair Kit for Grading: Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades.* Further, the high school began to seriously discuss McGarvey and Schwahn's *Inevitable*. There were concerns among faculty because of the school's ethical commitment to the core course of studies model – in which all freshmen and sophomores take the same foundational courses before individualizing in junior and senior year – but also because the faculty didn't see the research base in *Inevitable*. This has remained a live discussion.

At the middle school, the faculty embraced integrated performance-assessment as a way of assessing multiple standards – including work ethic and behavior standards (i.e., cross-content standards) – in authentic learning settings. For example, the social studies and English departments joined together to stage a History Day assessment. This was a months-long project that ultimately involved every student and every member of the faculty and dozens of community members. It built off the federal and state History Day program. Organized by teachers Alice Shea and Erika Swenson, the project took students through the entire process of researching and presenting a historical "turning point." Work produced by the students included papers on the topic of their choosing, reflective papers on the research process, a presentation and individual quizzes on their topics. Of the quizzes, Shea said, "Each kid had a different topic, so we wrote a separate quiz for each

kid." In the end, every student in the school – from highest achieving to most challenged – completed a project that developed out of his or her own considerations and interests, which allowed them to demonstrate proficiency on multiple social studies, ELA and cross-content standards.

The elementary schools similarly have continued to make individual progress. Together they have been sorting out what the Maine Learning Results, updated to include the Common Core, (and soon the Next Generation Science Standards) will mean for RSU 16's elementary students. Individually, each school pushes forward as they can. Minot Elementary School staff has been working hard to make sure what's going on in their classrooms matches what the curriculum and report cards say they are doing. They are working hard to ensure fidelity to their vision. "There are some teachers here," said one teacher, "who are very attached to their way of doing things, the old way." Mechanic Falls' Elm Street School – which was identified as a struggling school two years ago – has worked hard to foster collaboration in their building by using grant money to bring in Bruce Wellman, author of *Data Driven Dialogue*, to work with faculty. They've also begun using the *Café* and *Daily Five*, learner-centered literacy practices, to increase student engagement and ownership of their own reading (see video at the Center for Best Practice). At Poland Community School, teachers have worked toward grouping and regrouping students fluidly according to subject area and ability levels so that students are where they need to be at the time they need to be.

Continuing

The path of RSU 16 and the schools that comprise it has been oddly conflicted. On the one hand, Poland Regional High School has been notably progressive, leading the state in embracing once-controversial best practices, inviting other educators in to observe their process, and even in 2013, engaging with the multi-state New England Secondary Schools Coalition and League of Innovative Schools. The district as a whole, however, is, according to Meserve, "a typical Maine district – more standards-referenced than standards-based, but moving forward." This is a reflection of the fact that these new definitions of standards-referenced and standards-based – and the expectations associated with them – have emerged over the past years. It's also reflective of the fact that the rest of the state has been adopting a similar ideology, moving toward the mark that Poland Regional High School and a few other early adopters set a decade ago. What they have counted on is the habits the district has developed to collaborate and continue to strive, whatever distractions – e.g., consolidation, budget – happen to fall across their path.